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Cultural Commentary

You ate *how many* mice?

by William C. Levin

Sometimes only the researcher loves the research. Some friends came to dinner recently, and they made the mistake of asking me about the research trip I took this March to Kalmar, Sweden. Some while later, (I'm unsure on just how long that was) my wife, Jeanne, got me to stop explaining in detail the knotty problems I faced in the data collection by changing the subject slightly. "How 'bout them Red Sox?" she inquired.

It's a shame, though, that we don't often bother with research beyond our own areas of interest or expertise. Sometimes we just can't get past the title of a professional article. For example, would you read my research report to be titled "Attitudes Towards the Elderly Expressed by Swedish Maritime, Management and Nursing Students: Are Norms in a Socialized Culture General or Specific to Career Choice?" No? Sometimes it's just the name of the journal that stops us. Would you read anything in *The Journal of Trauma*?

Well, maybe you should. I suppose there are many cases to be made for the value of reading research from a wide range of disciplines. The most common is probably that it is good for you. It broadens your vocabulary and range of knowledge. But I wish to make a different sort of case here. I argue for the lunatic originality of the research enterprise. My guide to this lesser known aspect of the research enterprise is the local institution known as the "Ig Nobel Prize." (The name of the award is, I believe, borrowed from the comic strip Pogo by the late Walt Kelly. Kelly invented the Ignatz Nobel awards for his strip and "awarded" it to his political targets such as Spiro Agnew.)

The "Igs" are awarded each year at Harvard's Sanders Theater and published in the science humor magazine *Annals of Improbable Research*. When my own reading or conduct of research becomes humdrum or wearing, (and it often does), I turn to the Igs for a shot of inspiration. These are studies that have been done with such self-assured disregard for the opinions of others as to the likely worth of the work, that their authors cannot be regarded with anything other than admiration. Some seem, at first, downright loony. But it takes only brief reflection to imagine oneself entirely carried away by the sort of enthusiasm that must lead researchers to spend countless hours poring over data, the likely application for which is, questionable.

So, here are a few examples of Ig-winning work, in the hopes that they will make my case for the celebration of research drudges.

If you read the *Journal of Trauma* regularly, you might have noticed an article published there in 1984 by Peter Barss of McGill University in Montreal and entitled "Injuries Due to Falling Coconuts." In this study Dr. Barss conducted a 4-year review of trauma admissions to a provincial hospital in New Guinea and reported that "2.5% of such admissions were due to being struck by falling coconuts. Since mature coconut palms may have a height of up to 24 up to 35 meters and an un-husked coconut may weigh 1 to 4 kg, blows to the head of a force exceeding 1 metric tons are possible." Lest you make light of the data, two fatalities were reported in the study. Perhaps a subscription to this journal would be a prudent addition to your collection.

Not worried about coconut-induced trauma? What about those used textbooks you depended upon? They were trouble, you know. Publishing in the journal *Reading Research and Instruction* in 1997, Vicki Silvers of the University of Nevada-Reno and David Kreiner of Central Missouri State University examined "The Effects of Pre-Existing Inappropriate Highlighting on Reading Comprehension." I always wondered whether the student who was the first owner of my undergraduate biology text had mistakenly used it to guide him through an art history course.

One of my favorites is an article published in 1999 in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* by Justin Kreuger and David Dunning of Cornell University.



Their study, “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Leads to Inflated Self-Assessments,” should be of great concern and interest to all college teachers who want to know how to explain to a student why he or she has been given a low grade on an exam. Kreuger and Dunning found that students who scored very poorly in tests of humor, grammar and logic “grossly overestimated their test performance and ability. Although their test scores put them in the 12th percentile, they estimated themselves to be in the 62nd.” The dilemma for a teacher is apparent. Sometimes students who do terribly in an exam may also believe that they have done particularly well. Such students are in the very worst of positions to understand why they performed so badly. As the authors point out, such people “suffer a dual burden: Not only do these people reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their metacognitive incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it.” How, then, should a teacher deal with a student who asks for an explanation about why they have gotten a bad grade? If you tell the student that they misjudge their own abilities, then heed the author’s advise. “Paradoxically, improving the skills of participants, and thus increasing their metacognitive competence, helped them recognize the limitations of their abilities.” Kreuger and Dunning end their article with the cautionary and self-doubting acknowledgement that they could be wrong in their conclusions or methods, but that “it is not a sin we have committed knowingly.”

Perhaps you caught an article in the journal *Psychological Medicine* in 1999 entitled “Alteration of the Platelet Serotonin Transporter in Romantic Love.” In it the researchers examine the possible biological processes regulating romantic love. They find that in biochemical terms romantic love, especially in the early phase of a love relationship (the part when you lose your mind and act like a blithering idiot, if you recall) may be indistinguishable from obsessive-compulsive disorder. Though the article is full of talk about things like “serotonin (5-HT) transporter” and other terms designed to throw the reader off the scent of a valuable discovery, the Ig Nobel people were not fooled, and gave the authors of this research a prize in chemistry a year later. I only wish this data had been available in the 1960’s when I really needed it.

You may have noticed that I did not list the names of the authors of the article on the biochemistry of romantic love and a certain psychotic disorder. The reason is that, as with so many articles from the physical sci-

ences, this one has too many authors. In fact, in 1993 an Ig Nobel Prize was awarded to the a paper published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that had 976 co-authors. Being only a brief article, it has the distinction of having had 100 times as many authors as pages. (By comparison, the article on romantic love only had four co-authors, but they were all from the University of Pisa, and their names were too hard to type.)

For those of you who like to cook and are always looking for new recipe ideas, there is the research conducted in 1971 by Richard Wassersug of Dalhousie University and published in *The American Midland Naturalist*. His study, “On the Comparative Palatability of Some Dry-Season Tadpoles from Costa Rica” put me in mind of Farley Mowat’s primary research on the diet of some northern wolves. Mowat’s work was published in the semi-popular book (and later, movie) “*Never Cry Wolf*,” in which Mowat eats a goodly number of mice to demonstrate that wolves can survive a winter on just such a limited diet. It is probably just an accident of poor publicity strategy that Wassersug’s work never received the relatively wide distribution that Mowat’s did.

And, though I could go on lauding these studies for a very much longer time, let me end with a few titles (for the sake of brevity, sans authors, sans elaboration) that I hope need no further explanation. From the *Journal of Perception* in 1993, “The Possible Pain Experienced During Execution by Different Methods.” From the *British Medical Journal* in 1994, “Effects of Ale, Garlic and Soured Cream on the Appetite of Leeches.” From *Weatherwise* in 1975, “Chicken Plucking as a Measure of Tornado Wind Speed.” From the *Scottish Medical Journal* in 1993, “The Collapse of Toilets in Glasgow.” And, from *The Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association* in 1999, “Unyttig Om Urinprover,” which focuses, according to the folks at the Ig Nobel Prize, on the kinds of containers that patients choose when submitting urine samples.

Now, who wants to hear about how difficult it really was to measure attitudes towards the elderly among maritime, management and nursing students at Kalmar University in Sweden? Good! Well, to begin with, it was a dark and stormy March.

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